

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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UNITED KINGDOM

CUTTING TO THE CORE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN RESISTANCE IN THE UK



Open Rights Group

Javier Ruiz

www.openrightsgroup.org

Introduction

The global crisis in the UK

The financial crisis of 2008 hit the United Kingdom (UK) particularly hard. Besides its own housing bubble, and the vulnerability to commodity prices due to the global character of its economy, Britain had to provide support to a disproportionately large financial sector around the City of London, which was estimated would add £1.5 trillion to the national debt.¹ Although the recession officially ended at the end of 2009, the economy has not recovered sustained growth, and unemployment is on the rise, with fears of a double-dip recession. However, the defining aspect of the crisis in the UK has not been foreclosures, price increases or youth unemployment, but the national debt.

Austerity...

The centre-right coalition government that took power in May 2010 made reducing the national debt its main priority, and quickly embarked on a major austerity programme that it claimed could lead to an irreversible reshaping of the welfare state. The necessity and severity of the cuts are widely debated,² and in particular their relationship to bailing out the banking sector.³ There is also a widespread popular perception of bankers as villains, particularly in relation to the payment of large bonuses, fuelled by the rapid recovery of the sector in contrast to the rest of the economy. There are also fears that these cuts will push the country further into recession.⁴

...and its discontents

Perhaps surprisingly, the government – particularly the Conservative majority in the coalition – has not

suffered the expected level of political backlash seen in other countries under strict austerity measures, such as Spain. However, this does not mean that there is no opposition to these policies. The past year has seen an unprecedented intensity of social struggles by students, independent civic networks and trade unions, with the support of a large sector of the population. This past year has also witnessed a major escalation in innovative uses of the internet for social mobilisation, although it remains unclear whether this has reached its full potential for organisation and coordination.

UK Uncut

We have chosen the new phenomenon called UK Uncut as the central story for our report. Although it is not the largest or most sophisticated operation in terms of internet use, overall it is the most innovative.

UK Uncut came to prominence after 70 activists occupied and closed down mobile company Vodafone's flagship store in Central London on 27 October 2010.⁵ They had been mobilised on Twitter by the use of the hashtag #ukuncut, prompted by claims that Vodafone had been given an unfair amnesty on £6 billion of unpaid taxes, enough to cover some of the most severe cuts in social welfare. Within three days the protest had gone viral and 30 Vodafone stores had been occupied or picketed around the country.

There are now about 40 local Uncut groups in the UK, regularly organising fortnightly occupations and pickets of high street names associated with tax avoidance, including clothes retailer Topshop, the pharmacist Boots, and the banks HSBC and Barclays. Meanwhile, a spin-off called US Uncut has started across the Atlantic in the United States, with around 100 local participant nodes.

UK Uncut is characteristic of many current political phenomena in rejecting any form of incorporation or legal structure. In itself this is not new, UK Uncut being the latest incarnation of a particular political culture of creative non-violent direct action. Since the mid-1990s these networks have been very active in the UK on environmental issues,

1 www.thisismoney.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=493025&in_page_id=2

2 www.thisismoney.co.uk/credit-crisis

3 www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/feb/20/public-debt-gordon-brown

4 www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/jun/04/george-osborne-plan-not-working

5 www.ukuncut.org.uk/about/ukuncut

international solidarity, and the so-called anti-globalisation movement. These loose networks are generally composed of organising clusters based on personal acquaintance that coalesce around specific forms of action, rather than ideology. As a result we have seen clusters such as Reclaim the Streets, protest samba bands and a Climate Camp, among many others.

The focus on common action rather than political discourse can be very effective at cutting through complex arguments. Although most of the people in these networks would probably describe themselves as anti-capitalists, UK Uncut has focused on a very simple equation between cuts and tax avoidance. Also, closing down a store in a busy high street has a direct economic effect, albeit small.

Anyone can use the UK Uncut “brand” and call an action, and despite the potential for abuse, the core London organisers have only had to disown a very few fake calls to action.

UK Uncut core communications uses what has become the standard mobilisation toolkit of social media: Twitter, Facebook and a blog. They have large numbers of followers on all platforms – almost 30,000 on Twitter – and take pride in being media savvy. This includes placing tactical articles in progressive newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, and use of short viral YouTube videos.

Despite the strong use of the internet for mobilisation for actions, aspects of the actual planning – secretive by necessity, such as choosing a target – tend to rely on face-to-face personal communication and trust, while organisational continuity is maintained typically in weekly or fortnightly evening meetings in public places.

Winter of discontent 2010-2011

UK Uncut are smart netizens, but they are not alone. These same online tools were also used by students in their ultimately unsuccessful protests against the trebling of university fees to £9,000 per year, in what nevertheless became some of the most challenging demonstrations for the authorities in years. This winter up to 50,000 students took to the streets on three occasions in disdain at their own National Union of Students, seen as weak and too close to the political establishment. Social media, with Twitter tags such as #dayx, brought out much larger numbers of students than expected by both organisers and police.

The opening salvo was the spontaneous mass occupation of the headquarters of the Conservative Party on 10 November 2010, which caused widespread shock and energised the students.

This was followed by several increasingly assertive demonstrations accompanied by violent repression as authorities attempted to re-establish control of the situation. For the first time in recent memory, student protests included the more socially and ethnically diverse pupils from secondary education, who unlike their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, are generally not politicised. These protests were broadcasted around the world by satellite channels and weaved across social media. The UK has a disproportionate influence in global culture, as seen with the recent royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, and the student demos were followed live at homes in the Middle East,⁶ together with updates on WikiLeaks’ release of US diplomat cables.

The anti-fees days of action, together with a wave of dozens of high profile campus occupations,⁷ have been a significant political epiphany for a whole generation of students, largely outside unions and political parties. This also includes traditional left outfits that had dominated much of the resistance to the Iraq war. These new networks, some of them already active in campaigns against the Gaza war in January 2009, are finding their way into the wider anti-cuts movement, with many students taking part in UK Uncut actions.

At the same time, mainstream labour unions, completely tied up with the Labour Party and traditionally quite reluctant to mobilise, made some unprecedented moves this winter. Several large unions have publicly supported the students and UK Uncut⁸ – including mobilising for actions – with some even calling for “non-violent resistance”⁹ and a “broad strike movement”¹⁰ against what they see as all-out war on the welfare state.

Part of this rapport was an attempt to harness the online world with a large conference in January 2011 called Netroots UK,¹¹ which brought together 500 trade unionists, activists and key digital players. This included influential blogs, such as Liberal Conspiracy,¹² and specialist online campaigning organisations 38 Degrees and Avaaz. The presence of US providers of campaigning services and tools, such as Blue State Digital, was a giveaway to its

6 See Solomon, C. and Palmieri, T. (eds) (2011) *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions*, Verso, London.

7 occupations.org.uk/occupations-2010

8 www.unitetheunion.org/news__events/latest_news/unite_backs_uk_uncut_s_banks_a.aspx

9 www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk/2011/06/rail-union-tssa-votes-to-participate-in-non-violent-resistance-activities

10 www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/19/unions-students-strike-fight-cuts

11 www.netrootsuk.org

12 liberalconspiracy.org

being inspired by the US initiatives¹³ that helped bring Barack Obama to the White House.

The event was broadly perceived in positive terms, but ultimately it did not lead to a progressive digital front in the UK. Clear divisions emerged on a range of issues such as support for the Labour Party, although in the long term more subtle cultural differences may have also played a role. The large mobilisation of trade unions against the cuts on 26 March 2011 saw over 250,000 people in Central London, but in every way it was a traditional left and unions march. On the day, UK Uncut organised a series of theatrical actions independent from the main march, culminating in a mass occupation of luxury retailer, popular tourist destination and alleged tax avoider Fortnum and Mason's, which led to the controversial arrest of 145 people.

The most innovative use of Twitter on the day came from the police, whose @CO11MetPolice account¹⁴ had been tested for the first time during the Climate Camp protests in 2009. Meanwhile, some technical activists have upped the ante and developed their own live mobile information system to enable demonstrators to evade police lines. The Sukey project¹⁵ is a technological breakthrough in a long cat-and-mouse information game between police and protesters in Europe that has seen the development of multiple SMS and web systems, including Indymedia's early experiments with Twitter,¹⁶ and had even led to eight activists being sentenced to long prison terms in Sweden in 2001.¹⁷ The project is still in early stages, but as in previous attempts the critical success factors will be adoption rates and trust by activists.

The anti-cuts demo #march26 was called and organised by unions, but many of the participants in the main march came from other backgrounds. Many of these people travelled to London in trade union TUC¹⁸ buses or by independent means. There were also citizens with disabilities, who are doubly targeted by the cuts in services and reductions of benefits.¹⁹ Of course the students were there, together with lawyers and NGOs protesting cuts in legal aid,²⁰ and campaigners concerned about radical reforms to the National Health Service. Despite

the large and diverse crowd, small side events organised by anarchist networks, punctuated by attacks on banks and luxury shops, grabbed the attention of mainstream media.

Since the cuts were announced in May 2010, innumerable local campaigns have been organised by communities trying to save specific services ranging from children's centres and public libraries to hospitals and parks.²¹

These networks are all organising regular actions and campaigns, including UK Uncut, which seems to have survived the mass arrest of its London core. Several large trade unions also planned a coordinated strike on 30 June 2011, which promised to become the next focal point for the anti-cuts networks.

Organisation

The #march26 demo showed that the current landscape of social struggle in the UK is very rich and diverse, composed of overlapping networks, campaigns and organisations, and UK Uncut is embedded in this mesh. Questions remain, however, on whether this movement will be successful in achieving its aims. Local campaigns, mostly organised around Facebook pages, have little influence on decisions taken by central government, while large demonstrations without continuity are occasional storms any government can cope with. Even some of the most successful national single-issue campaigns, such as those on legal aid and disability, taken in isolation will simply push the cuts elsewhere, notwithstanding the positive contagion effect they may have.

As we saw in relation to Netroots UK, attempts to bring together diverse groups are fraught with difficulties. The leftwing gathering²² around the union-led Coalition of Resistance²³ seemed to reproduce the model of past experiences, such as the unsuccessful Put People First mobilisation around the London G20 in 2009.²⁴ Nevertheless, in a departure from the past, they now support non-violent civil disobedience, and even help publicise UK Uncut actions. Proponents of a more grassroots approach believe that a union-led campaign will fail to engage the rest of society affected by austerity policies,²⁵ but the alternatives have so far failed to materialise.

13 www.netrootsnation.org

14 twitter.com/#!/CO11MetPolice

15 sukey.org

16 www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/09/380691.html

17 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_during_the_EU_summit_in_Gothenburg_2001

18 righttowork.org.uk/2011/01/transport-to-the-tuc-march-for-the-alternative-on-26th-march

19 www.dpac.uk.net/2011/02/light-up-a-map-of-the-uk-online-in-solidarity-with-the-protesters-on-the-streets-on-26-march

20 www.justice-for-all.org.uk/Who-we-are

21 stopthecutscoalition.org

22 www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/04/time-to-organise-resistance-now

23 www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk

24 www.putpeoplefirst.org.uk

25 www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/09/tony-benns-coalition-resistance-needs-strategic-approach

There are profound differences on the type of organisation needed, with an important sector believing that these decentralised networks fuelled by the internet – UK Uncut, students, etc. – will be enough to generate a new movement with sufficient coordination to reverse the cuts.²⁶ The success of leaderless network movements in the Middle East and North Africa seemed for a while to vindicate this approach, although this is now tempered by events in several countries such as Syria.

A halfway point is provided by the website False Economy,²⁷ which provides a very polished portal of information on campaigns, also allowing the publication of new events. There are also several other projects using web tools to allow people to report and map specific cuts.²⁸ However, there are no spaces for the national coordination of campaign groups, and despite lots of ad hoc communications through backchannels, nobody is publicly discussing a real strategy.

UK Uncut activists claim they would like to have a national meeting of local campaigns, despite the difficulty of not knowing who exactly organises in each city. However, they fear the authorities would use it as an opportunity to clamp down on alleged ringleaders, in another step in the campaign of sustained repression against them.

Action – reaction

After being caught off guard by UK Uncut, the authorities slowly reacted. There had been some minor arrests around the country and isolated use of pepper spray against peaceful protesters in London. However, the mass arrest on 26 March of 145 activists seems to be a turning point designed, albeit unsuccessfully, to incapacitate the organisation. Bail conditions prevent the activists from entering the main shopping area in Central London and all their clothes were taken for forensic examination. In a new frontier for rights and technology, their smartphones were confiscated with all their digital social and political life inside. To achieve this with home computers would have required a special warrant.

The fact that there were almost no other arrests on the day other than for non-violent protests, despite the destruction of property by others, has generated criticisms of the Metropolitan Police's handling of the situation. Some lawyers have said that this is an attack on the fundamental democratic

right to protest.²⁹ Large sectors of the media have falsely portrayed UK Uncut as responsible for the violence, no doubt helped by police Twitter messages such as:

@CO11MetPoliceMetropolitan Police
Fortnum and Mason's is surrounded by police as this is a crime scene. Persons responsible will be arrested #ukuncut

The use of Twitter by police has been criticised by several of the people interviewed for this report. There is an impression of lack of accountability, which allows messages out that would be a lot more nuanced in a press conference.

Students have also been treated quite harshly. Prime Minister David Cameron threatened that the “full weight of the law” would fall on students who occupied the Conservative headquarters,³⁰ with sectors of the media collaborating in publishing “Wanted” photo galleries to help hunt for suspects.³¹

Police handling of further student protests and smaller marches that broke away from union-organised events has generated great controversy. This is particularly due to the widespread use of “kettling”, which involves surrounding and corralling protesters for long periods of time without proper access to food, water or sanitation. Critics claim this is a punitive detention designed to put people off from going to demonstrations, rather than preventing breaches of public order. It is also claimed that this containment technique provokes more violence as protesters feel trapped and attempt to break through police lines. Besides kettling, police have been criticised for excessive baton charges and riding horses against groups of schoolchildren.

Separately, police have arrested suspected protest leaders in early morning raids, particularly around the time of the royal wedding³² – although it is unclear how police intelligence relates to internet surveillance. According to protester support group Green and Black, and lawyer Mike Schwartz from Bindmans, there are no known cases of people being arrested on the basis of evidence collected on social media. However, comments made on Facebook have apparently been brought up in court to

²⁶ See the article on Open Sourcing of Political Activism by Guy Aitchison and Aaron Peters here: felixcohen.co.uk/FightBack

²⁷ falseeconomy.org.uk

²⁸ wherearethecuts.org and anticuts.org.uk

²⁹ www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/mar/30/uk-uncut-arrests-protests?CMP=NECNETXT766

³⁰ www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/guy-aitchison/significance-of-millbank-british-protest-begins

³¹ www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard-pictures/CCTV+images+of+student+riot+suspects+released-latest.do?id=23379553

³² news.sky.com/skynews/Home/Royal-Wedding/Royal-Wedding-Police-Have-Arrested-20-People-Amid-Fears-Of-A-Plot-To-Disrupt-The-Royal-Wedding/Article/201104415981406

support the case against those arrested for public disorder.

A very controversial incident involving Facebook was the closure of over 50 profile pages of protest groups on the eve of the royal wedding,³³ ostensibly for breaching the terms and conditions of Facebook, which make clear that organisations cannot use personal profiles. Facebook denies any active involvement, claiming that closures are automated if sites are reported. Attempts by Open Rights Group to find out the level of coordination behind the closures have been stonewalled by Facebook. Interestingly, Richard Allan, Facebook EU head of policy, claims that a similar situation happened in Egypt during the protests, which led to them strengthening their processes for migrating from personal profiles to pages suited for organisations. Egyptian activists have partly confirmed this.

Without Facebook's collaboration we will probably never know who reported the offending protest sites, and whether this involved elements of the state. An early attempt by police to close down a website providing students with advice on destroying potential evidence to avoid arrest³⁴ backfired when it was mirrored WikiLeaks style. Since then the authorities have taken a more conciliatory tone, with, for example, Sukey being invited to friendly talks with police – although this could also be interpreted as letting the activists know they are known.

In an attempt to counter criticisms, the police took the unprecedented step of allowing human rights observers into their control room for the 26 March demo, but they were criticised³⁵ for the fact that the use of kettling was considered as first resort. In general, the ubiquity of multimedia recording devices and social media has had an effect on police, with several high-profile cases where they have been caught lying red handed.³⁶ A recent court ruling in April 2011 placed further restrictions on the use of kettling.³⁷

In general, the repression of the anti-cuts movement, while fairly harsh for UK standards, is quite targeted and has not reached large sectors of society. However, it shows that the movement has not yet managed to break into politically neutral spaces to dominate the national conversation, win the arguments and de-legitimise any criminalisation. This, for example, has happened in Spain with the build

up of the broad and radical democracy and anti-austerity movement, organised around town square occupations. There are further protests and strikes on the horizon.

P.S. And then the riots – looking back at action steps already taken

As this report was being finalised, we witnessed the largest explosion of civil unrest in England in living memory, with five people killed in various incidents and widespread looting and arson. The disturbances started after police in North London shot a black suspect, but quickly spread, first across London and then major cities in England. Although there were no clear political demands, the demographics of those arrested show the majority to be very young and generally unemployed, with 41% living in the top 10% of the poorest areas of the UK.³⁸

The aftermath has seen a draconian crackdown that resembles an undeclared state of emergency, admittedly with widespread support from the majority of the population, who after the shock and fear are now in the mood for vengeance. Around 3,000 people have been arrested³⁹ as police pore over 20,000 hours of closed circuit television (CCTV) footage. Some 100 people have been sent to prison every day since,⁴⁰ with courts instructed to “disregard normal sentencing guidelines.”⁴¹ As an example, a college student without a criminal record was jailed for six months for the opportunistic theft of a bottle of mineral water.⁴² The government is calling for those convicted to be “stripped of benefits,”⁴³ and the newly launched e-petitions site has seen 216,000 people in support of this measure.⁴⁴ Some families where one member has been arrested during the riots are already being evicted from social housing.⁴⁵

In this bonfire of liberal values and civil rights the internet and social media have received special attention. While North London was still in flames, a local parliamentarian unsuccessfully called for shutting down Blackberry Messenger (BBM)

33 wiki.openrightsgroup.org/wiki/FB_takedowns

34 www.fitwatch.org.uk

35 www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13109259

36 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Ian_Tomlinson

37 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kettling

38 www.alex-singleton.com/?p=507

39 www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/09/uk-riots-data-figures

40 www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-08-20/two-murders-among-crimes-in-uk-riots-police.html

41 www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/15/riots-magistrates-sentencing

42 www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8695988/London-riots-Lidl-water-thief-jailed-for-six-months.html

43 www.communitycare.co.uk/blogs/childrens-services-blog/2011/08/strip-convicted-rioters-of-their-benefits-says-ids.html

44 epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/7337

45 www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/12/london-riots-wandsworth-council-eviction

service, pointed out as the key tool rioters were using to coordinate.⁴⁶ Blackberrys are the most popular smartphone with UK youth, holding a 37% market share,⁴⁷ partly due to BBM, their free messaging service. BBM runs on Blackberry's internal network and is scrambled with basic encryption,⁴⁸ which makes it more difficult to monitor than the fully transparent Twitter. This has been seen as a threat by several governments around the globe, such as India,⁴⁹ although in the UK Blackberry is fully cooperating with authorities.⁵⁰

The prime minister launched a widely condemned attack on social media as part of his speech to Parliament on 11 August.⁵¹ David Cameron initially called for police to be able to shut down social networks, and for rioters to be banned from using social media. In our experience of preferred modes of internet governance in the UK, the government will probably eschew new kill-switch powers for police, and probably propose some self-regulated scheme. Home Secretary Theresa May has announced a meeting with major social media firms

Facebook, Twitter and RIM (the company behind Blackberry).⁵² It remains to be seen whether social media companies will risk their reputation by agreeing to self-censorship, or the UK government will press with new legislation. A seventeen-year-old has already been banned for twelve months from Facebook by a judge after posting a message saying "I think we should start rioting, it's about time we stopped the authorities pushing us about and ruining this country."⁵³ Separately, two young men have received four-year prison sentences for setting up calls on Facebook for "riots" in rural areas. In both cases only the police turned up and no violence took place.⁵⁴

Many of the critics of this attack on the internet and social communications point at the valuable role these served in providing timely information, fundraising for victims, and even the coordination of mass clean-up operations.⁵⁵ And, some argue, social websites have also been used by police, with their Flickr photo gallery of suspects generating hundreds of identification calls.⁵⁶ ■

46 www.theregister.co.uk/2011/08/09/bbm_suspension

47 stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/cmr11/uk/1.39

48 www.berryreview.com/2010/08/06/faq-blackberry-messenger-pin-messages-are-not-encrypted

49 www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c73f4b10-bf47-11e0-898c-00144feabdco.html

50 www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/aug/09/london-riots-blackberrys-police

51 www.apc.org/en/node/12807

52 socialmediaobservatory.com/social-media-news/facebook-rim-to-meet-with-uk-government-over-proposed-social-media-ban

53 www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-14556016

54 www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/16/facebook-riot-calls-men-jailed

55 twitter.com/#!/riotcleanup

56 www.flickr.com/photos/metropolitanpolice/sets/72157627267892973

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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